



News Release

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

NUMBER: 56-00
FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATE
<http://www.dhs.ca.gov>

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SUPPORT FOR SMOKE-FREE BARS GROWS STRONGER IN CALIFORNIA

Statewide poll of California's bar patrons shows dramatic increase in support for state's 2½-year-old law prohibiting smoking in bars

SACRAMENTO -- California's smoke-free bar law is gaining popularity among bar patrons, State Health Director Diana M. Bontá, R.N., Dr.P.H., announced today.

According to a survey conducted this summer for the California Department of Health Services (DHS) by the Field Research Corporation, a leading independent public opinion research firm, 73 percent of bar patrons surveyed said they approve of the law that prohibits smoking in bars. The rate represents a dramatic 24 percent increase from the rate of 59 percent in 1998 when the law took effect and the first bar patron poll was conducted.

"It is very good news to see increased support for this important public health law over the past two-and-a-half years," said Bontá. "Despite repeated attempts by the tobacco industry and its allies to overturn this measure, the vast majority of California bar patrons agree that they want their bars to be smoke-free."

The poll, conducted during June and July, also shows that 75 percent of bar patrons say that a smoke-free environment inside clubs, bars, lounges and restaurants with bars is "very important" or "somewhat important." The rate represents an increase of 14 percent from the rate of 66 percent in 1998. In addition, 72 percent of bar patrons say they are concerned about the effects of secondhand smoke on their health, an increase of 7 percent from 1998.

"California's bold endeavor to protect bar patrons and employees from secondhand smoke is working," said Bontá. "Although the tobacco industry still argues that secondhand smoke is only a minor inconvenience and that smokers should be accommodated, the majority of California bar patrons are saying they want a smoke-free environment and approve of the law."

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Among bar patrons who smoke, the survey showed a significant decline in the proportion who said that they smoked in an indoor bar area the last time they visited a bar. In the current survey, only 14 percent of smokers said that they smoked inside the bar area, an improvement from 25 percent in February 1998.

“The majority of bar patrons, 86 percent, are complying with the law to the benefit of everyone inside the bar, especially employees,” said Bontá.

Other key findings of the survey include:

- 91 percent of bar patrons either go to bars more often or have not changed their bar-going behavior as a result of the law.
- 87 percent of bar patrons say they enjoy visiting bars just as much or in most cases, more due to the law.
- On average, bar patrons are staying longer at bars. Sixty-eight percent of bar patrons reported spending at least an hour at a bar in 2000, nearly a 10 percent increase since 1998.
- Support for the law almost doubled among smokers since 1998, increasing from 24 percent to 44 percent.

This statewide survey was conducted among a random sample of recent bar patrons age 21 or older living in California. It is the third similar survey conducted by the Field Research Corporation for DHS since the smoke-free bar provision of AB 13 went into effect in January 1998. A total of 1,000 recent bar patrons were interviewed at their place of residence using a random digit dial methodology.

California law has required nearly all other workplaces to be smoke-free since Jan. 1, 1995. Secondhand smoke is the third leading cause of preventable death and is scientifically linked to numerous diseases, including lung cancer, heart disease, asthma and other respiratory diseases.